E very year, a number of us still make new year’s resolutions. Those usually fall into some theme of positive transformation – new job, better relationships, a slimmer waistline…

Hands up if you have fulfilled your 2014 new year’s resolutions. Well, congratulations! You’ve just joined the 8% club.

The truth of the matter is, a hefty 92% of us start out with good intentions to change something about ourselves and fail spectacularly. In 2013, Forbes reported that research from the University of Scranton suggests only 8% of us keep our new year’s resolutions.

Granted, none of us intentionally set out to fail. So, why is it so difficult to succeed in changing ourselves? How does understanding how our brains are wired help in creating an effective learning culture within organisations?

At the heart of it all, is this little spectre called fear. Conventional wisdom tells us that we fear the pain of change and the unknown.

Let me illustrate this with a short anecdote.

Recently, my grandmother had to go for some physiotherapy sessions to stretch her leg muscles in order to prevent stiffening. The doctor then told us that she cried in anticipation of the fear of pain, not pain itself.

However, it is precisely this fear of ‘what may not come to pass’ that another day. The doctor then told us that she cried in anticipation of the fear of pain, not pain itself.

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Arguably, one could say that the fear of pain is the residue of a healthy survival instinct – we flee from situations that carry the risk of pain or injury, raising our chances to live another day.

However, if we are to believe the learning model first proposed by Lave and Wenger, French social anthropologist and Swiss educational theorist respectively, in the early 1990s, many principles of situated learning resonate with the underlying basics of adult learning – namely, learning is not just a transmission of abstract knowledge from human to human, or even text to human.

Learning, be it child or adult, is a social process by which knowledge is co-constructed by both the teacher and learner – the teacher deconstructs, the learner reconstructs. Learning has to be accessible by being situated in the contextual environment specific to the learner.

E-learning

With technological advances and the rise of mobile computing devices, it’s no wonder that e-learning has revolutionised education methods, especially with the scaling of knowledge and technical skills.

Although the word ‘e-learning’ is now 13 years old, there is still tremendous growth in the global and Asian market. According to Global Industry Analysts (GIA), corporate training alone is a growing USD200bil industry, and e-learning is estimated to grow into a USD107bil market by 2015.

What's more, the world's most rapidly-growing e-learning markets are Vietnam (44.3% growth rate) and Malaysia (39.4%), according to New Ambient Insight report. Other Asian markets such as Thailand, the Philippines, India and China are following closely behind.

E-learning is an arguably cost-effective delivery method. However, organisations would do well to keep in mind that different delivery methods would suit different learning purposes and outcomes.

Business simulations

The US National Center for Biotechnology Information cites the average American attention span as a total of eight seconds.

Unsurprisingly, given our increase in exposure to external stimuli, our ability to focus on a given task without being distracted has dropped in recent years. Horrifyingly for the human race, we now fare worse than the humble goldfish’s attention span of nine seconds.

Yet, I’m sure you’ve read the horrific news articles on a number of youths who die from dehydration, starvation and a lack of rest due to prolonged playing of video games.

Although an extreme example, video games’ ability to hold our concentration for extended lengths of time has ensured that the study of gamification remains a fascinating exploration in the psychology of learning.

Business simulations borrow much from game theory and mathematical models in their replication of real-life scenarios. Simulations are, in essence, a controlled environment that creates interactive learning experiences for participants.

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) identifies ‘feedback’ as a critical component in effective learning and leadership development – business simulations allow participants to experiment with different decisions and see immediate consequences for their actions. Critically, participants can give and receive instant feedback within the ‘safe’ environment of a simulation, and immediately work on applying their learnings for continuous improvement.

When you immerse a person within a safe but believable context, having to constantly make decisions, experience consequences, reflect on feedback whilst being motivated to complete the challenge in the game, mental focus is taken away from the fear of pain and change.

The participant is gradually eased into a pattern of new thinking and behaviours.

Microlearning

Among the latest buzzwords in the learning and development space, microlearning is a series of relatively short, specific ‘bursts’ or ‘units’ of learning. It’s commonly delivered on mobile devices, promoting learning through short-term interaction with micro-content.

Whilst not yet widely recognised in educational psychology, microlearning is gaining momentum as ‘education for Generation Distracted’ – not surprising, given that today’s young learners have been weaned with rapid-fire online knowledge.

Microlearning has the potential to be a powerful tool for organisations to keep students and employees in a state of continuous learning as part of a blended learning philosophy.

However, organisations should also know that microlearning has limited potential for sensing the subtleties of real-life context and situations, and hardly robust enough to replace an entire learning philosophy.

Stay tuned – this space keeps on evolving.

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